

# HUSING



## LABOUR CONFERENCE SPECIAL

Labour Housing Group looks forward to showcasing the work we have accomplished on our own account and in collaboration with other campaigning organisations.

Our major policy initiative in this, our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, is the **Council Home Building project**. Building council homes is the missing solution to the housing crisis and all that is needed is a government that shares councils' ambitions. Our report shows what needs doing and how Labour councils are already building homes in their areas.

We also renew our partnership with the **Socialist Environment and Resources Association (SERA)**

Finally, we join the **Labour Campaign for Human Rights** in promoting our shared interest through our Conference motion (see page 2). If you are planning to visit Conference, details are in our Labour Party Conference 2021 calendar below.

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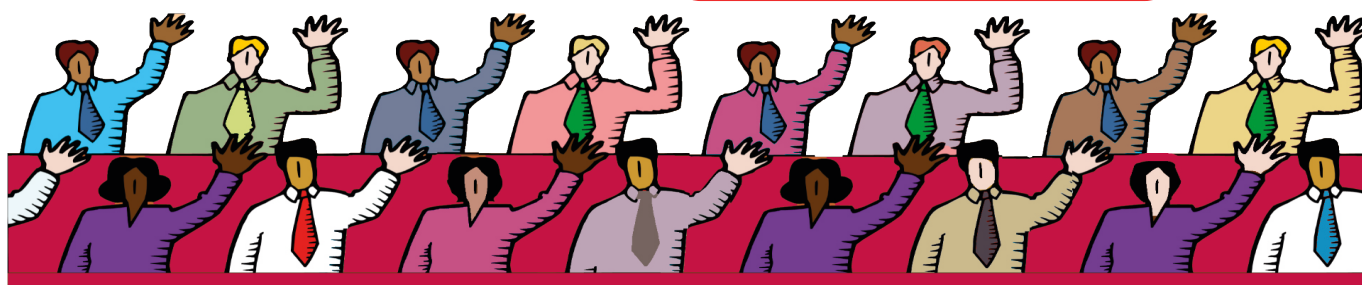
**Page 10** Who we are

### Events promoted by Labour Housing Group

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
					LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE	
27	28	29	30	Building Back Greener Homes (SERA): Tuesday 28th 12.30-2.00, Hotel du Vin, 2 Ship Street, BN1 1AD		
LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE						

Labour Housing Group's fringe meeting - "Housing as a Human Right" Monday 27th September, 7pm Jubilee Library, Jubilee Street, Brighton BN1 1GE

Council Home Building: Sunday 26th September 7.30-9.00pm Hotel du Vin, 2 Ship Street, BN1 1AD



# HOUSING MOTIONS AT LABOUR CONFERENCE (1)

## Labour Housing Group motion for Annual Conference 2021

### Housing as a Human Right

Conference agrees that Labour has a longstanding record of positive policies based on respect for human rights, and housing policies aimed at ensuring that everyone can live in a home that is healthy, safe and affordable.

The Grenfell Tower fire and Covid pandemic have now highlighted a lack of investment in public housing, unsafe building practices, and weak legal protection for tenants and leaseholders alike.

In addition, we know that the current housing crisis disproportionately affects women, ethnic minorities, young people, and people on lower incomes. The UK has obligations under international law to ensure that everyone enjoys the human right to housing that is affordable, accessible, habitable, secure and culturally appropriate, without discrimination.

Unfortunately, while the 1998 Human Rights Act protects rights such as free speech, it does not explicitly guarantee the right to adequate housing. Setting this right into legislation would help to eradicate homelessness, and could avert housing problems for people in all tenures.

**Conference therefore calls upon a Labour Government to:**

- **Enshrine the right to adequate housing in domestic law, to ensure that future Governments respect, protect and fulfil the human right to adequate housing.**
- **Commit to a radical programme of building decent public housing, strengthening tenants' rights, renovating unhealthy and unsafe housing and ending homelessness.**
- **Take forward any further legal changes which would be needed to support these aims and to complete these human rights which are the bedrock of Labour values.**

# HOUSING MOTIONS AT LABOUR CONFERENCE (2)

The *Campaign for Council Housing* and *Momentum* are promoting an identical motion for debate at Labour Conference, which must give it a good chance of being debated.

Their main objective seems to be to reinforce earlier policies rather than explore new ones or propose alternative means of achieving them.

## LABOUR CAMPAIGN FOR COUNCIL HOUSING



The Covid pandemic has aggravated the severe economic and health impacts of the housing crisis. In December 2020 the Health Foundation identified that prior to the pandemic a third of households in England had housing problems relating to overcrowding, affordability and poor quality housing. Overcrowding has been a key factor in the spread of Covid.

Prior to the pandemic, thousands of households were struggling with their housing costs in the unaffordable and insecure private rented sector. As a result of Covid many more households have suffered reduced income, with 450,000 additional households falling behind on their housing payments.

When the temporary ban on evictions was lifted the Resolution Foundation revealed that 400,000 renting households had been served with eviction notices and millions more were worried about their housing costs. The ending of the Furlough scheme will make matters worse, with predictions of a wave of evictions and a huge increase in homelessness.

The Conservative government has done little to support those struggling to access decent, affordable and secure housing to rent.

Conference, therefore, calls upon the Labour Party to demand that the government takes action now to end the housing crisis by:

- Delivering the building of 150,000 social rent homes each year, including 100,000 council homes funded by £10 billion grant a year.
- Ending 'right to buy'.
- Reviewing council housing debt to address underfunding of housing revenue accounts.

Conference also calls upon Labour to place these actions at the centre of its housing policies.

# NEW-BUILD PITFALLS

*This article by Jennifer Budden relates her current experience of private developers in the Plymouth area. It serves as a timely reminder that the present arrangements for building new homes can be just as unsatisfactory for homeowners as for other forms of tenure when it comes to leaking roofs, poor quality work and unreasonable charges.*

## Personal experience

I live on a new-build estate. Our house was bought 'off plan' and completed in February 2017. Because the "Volume House Builder" (VHB) imposed a very short timescale to exchange contracts we could only use the solicitors that they recommended due to the time it would have taken to check title. (These solicitors could only be contacted remotely, provided the minimum of information and a totally impersonal service.)

Our house had no telephone or broadband connection installed at completion. Broadband is ubiquitous in modern life and not having it is like not having water or electricity.

## Unsustainable

Because the coalition government rescinded the stipulation that all new builds should be carbon neutral by 2016, none of our homes has photo-voltaic or solar thermal heating, even though the whole terrace has south facing roofs without gables.

## Poor quality control

Our VHB has no appointed Director of Quality Control or department for handling serious and recurrent defects. VHBs appear to employ very few permanent construction staff and subcontract most building work with contracts awarded purely on the basis of cost.

As a result, subcontractors complete work as quickly as possible or employ workers who are newly qualified or lack experience. Often the quality of this work is poorly supervised.

In our experience, individual VHB staff who deal with customers are often concerned about quality and try hard to fix faults, but

their managers prioritise staying within budget.

Examples of faults found in new builds by different local VHBs include:

- water penetrating the ceiling due to the shower not being properly plumbed-in
- sewage appearing in a neighbour's garden
- condensing boilers' outflow pipes incorrectly aligned so that water is directed outside instead of being returned to the boiler
- room thermostats wrongly placed so that the ground floor of a town house is always cold;
- houses built on an old quarry subsiding because the ground hadn't been properly filled in
- houses suffering a leaking roof for 8 years due to the failure to identify a missing waterproof membrane.

The likelihood of these faults being identified early is lessened by building inspection being done by private companies paid by the VHB rather than the Local Authority.

## Continuing maintenance

Fixing faults that appear in the first two years after completion is the responsibility of the VHB, but the average amount set aside by VHBs for this is reputed to be only £23,000.

The maintenance period from 2 to 10 years is the responsibility of the [National House Building Council](#) (NHBC) but householders sometimes have to employ a technical specialist to prove that the problem is serious enough for the NHBC to fund the repair.





# NEW-BUILD PITFALLS (continued)

Even when the problem of a leaking roof was identified – and after 2000 emails had been exchanged – it took more than 18 months to decide what to do about it. At the time of writing, permanent remedial action had still not taken place.

## Environment

Although our house is freehold, the surrounding public space, planters, street trees etc is administered by an *estate management company* which is theoretically responsible for all landscaping and repairs. It levies service charges, which all freeholders and leaseholders are required to pay.

In some developments, the management company retains ownership of roads and pavements. Fortunately, ours are being adopted by the council, but even four years from the end of building on our estate, some roads have not been adopted because of drainage issues.

Our property manager is also responsible for a large number of other estates and, as the company base is situated two hours' drive away, has no local knowledge.

## Continually unsatisfactory service

We have had experience of three estate management companies and none of them has given high levels of service, were responsive to their 'customers' or provided value for money.

The current system ensures that the individual home owner has to take the initiative in all cases. With persistence, this might finally gain attention and lead to some remedial action, but experience has shown us: *'don't hold your breath'*.

It is difficult to see how home owners who buy a new-build property can know the quality of the construction of local roads and pavements or whether they meet current stipulations for disabled people etc., even though they become responsible for their upkeep and

maintenance when the VHB leaves the site.

## Life after Covid

Through experience of Covid, we increasingly realise how important green space is for mental well-being, while climate change is making it clearer that planting and foliage are very important in cooling the temperature.

In high density urban areas this can mitigate the experience of hot weather and also help slow water run-off which is partly driving flash floods.

**Unfortunately, VHBs will seek to cram in as many units as possible to increase profit.**

As Angela Rayner pointed out recently, some VHBs are big donors to the Tory Party so the present government may have little incentive to improve either construction quality or customer service in the immediate future.



If you would like to make a contribution to

LHG's Housing Newsletter,

please email the Editor at

[pauljmartin@clara.co.uk](mailto:pauljmartin@clara.co.uk)



# EMPTY HOMES

You would think that, with so many people currently desperate to find a home, the number of empty properties would have fallen towards zero.

Sadly, you would be mistaken.

The campaigning group [Action on Empty Homes](#), which monitors the data published by Government and researches the underlying causes, has provided evidence that shows **the number of empty homes is actually increasing in England.**

There was a significant downward trend in the country's stock of empty homes from 2010 and the count had dipped below the 600,000 mark by 2016.

This picture has since reversed and the number has **now risen above 665,000.**

Of course, the pattern varies across the country according to the particular local mix of social and economic factors, but the regions fall broadly into two groups as regards the empty homes count:

- **Stable or falling** – North-West, North-East, South-West and Yorkshire & Humberside.
- **Rising since 2016** – East Midlands, East of England, London, West Midlands and the South-East

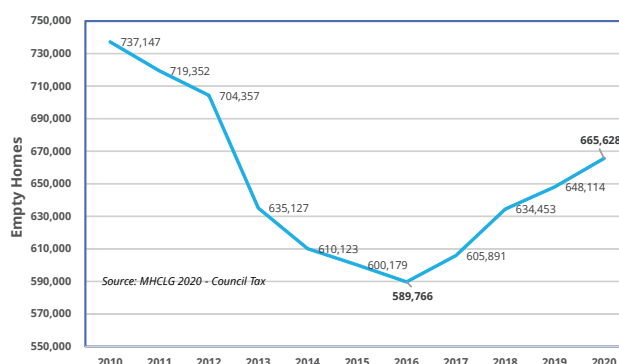
An obvious explanation is that, as house prices continue to rise for the second group, empty homes represent a “good investment” that could be quickly realised for some owners.

Another is that some owners cannot afford to restore sub-standard properties.

Lastly, there is considerable variation between local authorities' in terms of political will to tackle the issue and provide resources, for instance, to ensure that landlords are penalised for long-term vacant properties, e.g. through the use of Council Tax sanctions.

**One thing we can be sure of is that there needs to be a more consistent and effective approach nationally.**

Empty Homes in England 2010-2021



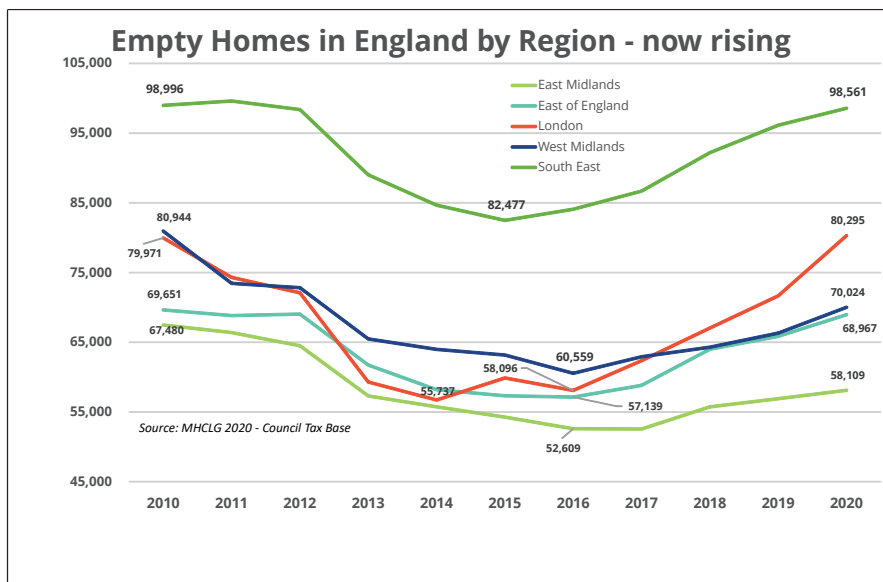
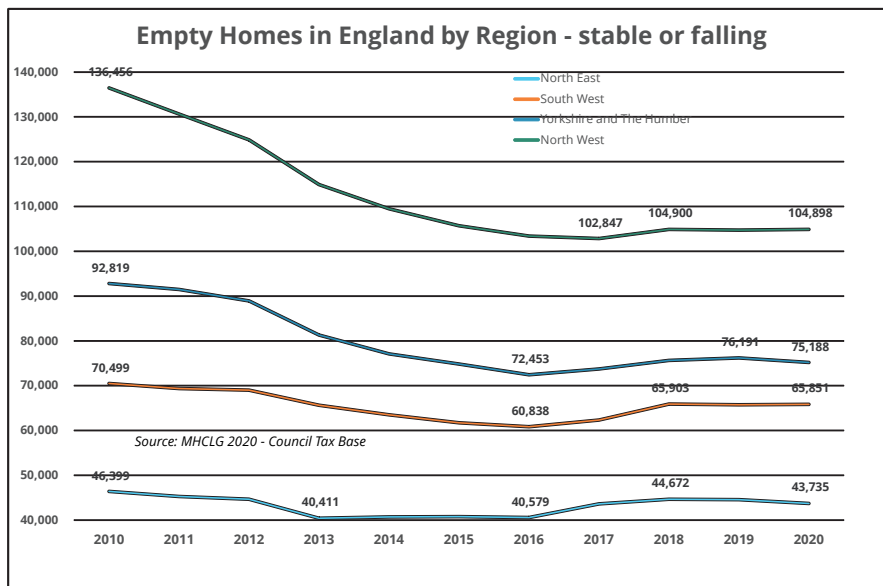
## REASONS FOR EMPTY HOMES EXISTING

There is a wide range of reasons why homes may be counted as “empty” by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Office for National Statistics and not all of them are immediately obvious.

Here are some possible explanations:-

1. **Unfit for human habitation** due to:
  - a. Dereliction and disrepair caused by owners' neglect
  - b. Actual structural damage caused by fire, flood or subsidence or threatened by coastal erosion
  - c. Toxicity caused by uncontrolled asbestos, radon gas, infestations, damp or mould
2. **Lack of demand** due to:
  - a. Inability to pay due to lack of local buying power
  - b. Fear of crime
  - c. Inaccessibility due to poor local transport
  - d. Lack of amenities and/or services
3. **Legal obstacles** such as:
  - a. Disputed ownership due to, for instance, disputed wills and intestate estates or planning disputes.
4. **Demographic factors** such as:
  - a. Ageing populations
  - b. Actual population reduction

# WHY SO MANY EMPTY HOMES?



## Action on Empty Homes

was established in 1992 to try to ensure that empty homes in England are brought back into use for those in housing need.

Its focus is on ensuring empty homes are brought back into use for those priced out of decent housing across England or in housing need, for example, due to disability or long-term health problems.

As well as campaigning, it is an invaluable source of [facts and figures](#) on the subject.

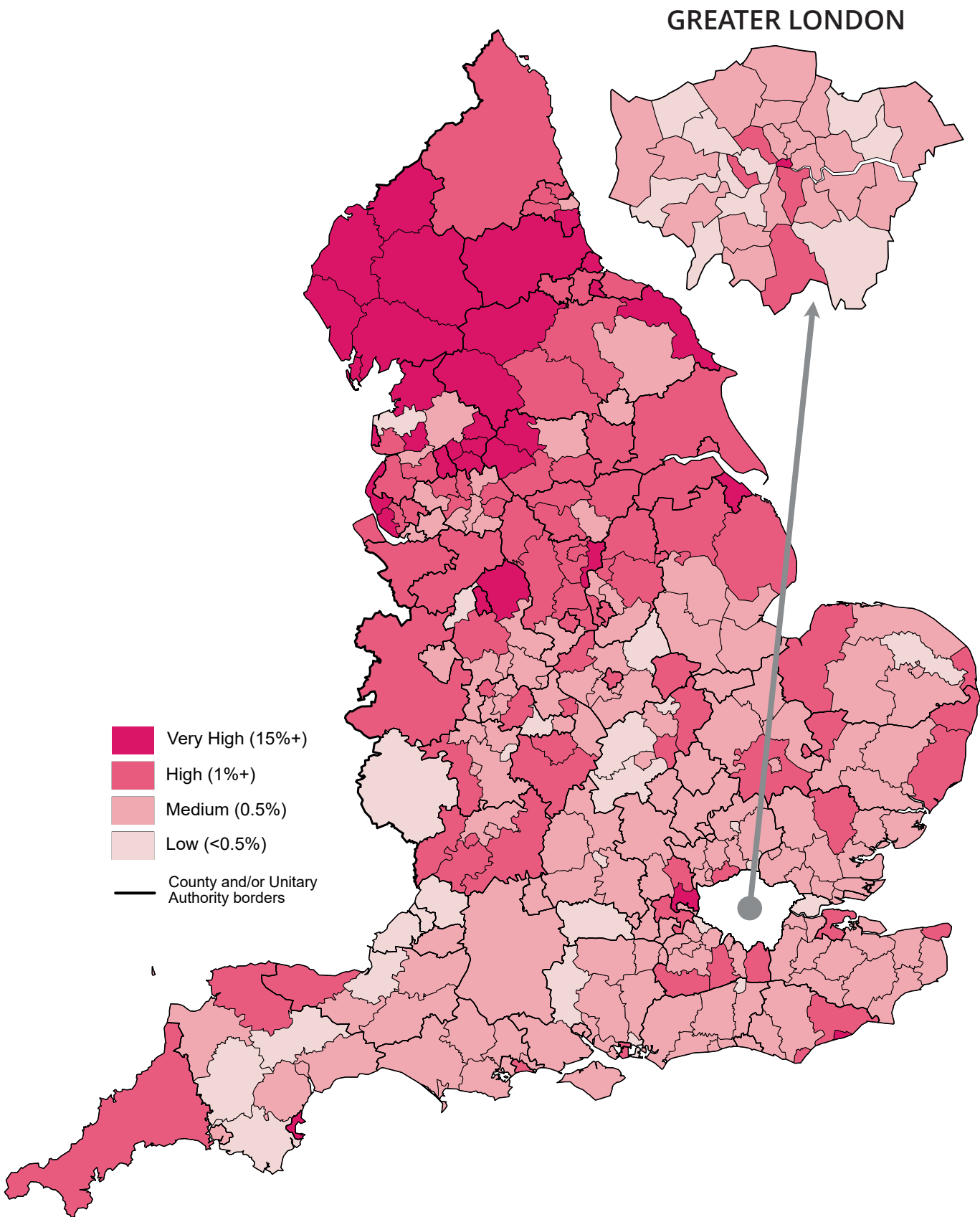
## WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS?

**Action on Empty Homes** has called for a three-pronged attack on this long-standing problem.

- Government investment to tackle the growth in empty homes
- Local Authority commitment to developing strategies for community-led solutions for empty homes
- Community-led action to refurbish empty homes in local communities.



# EMPTY HOMES IN ENGLAND



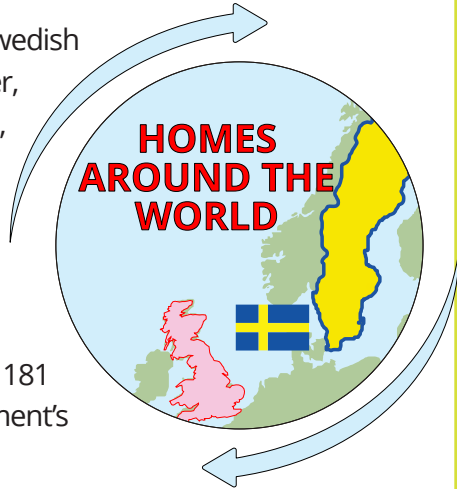


## GOVERNMENT FALLS - OVER RENT CONTROLS!

It would be easy to think that unaffordable housing is unique to the UK.

*We'd be wrong, of course.*

In June, the Swedish Prime Minister, Stefan Lofven, lost a no-confidence vote over rent controls which was supported by 181 of the Parliament's 349 MPs.



Lofven is himself in favour of rent controls but his coalition had agreed to look into the idea of scrapping them in new-build blocks to appease two small centre-right opposition parties that help prop up his minority government.

**In response, the Left Party, a long-time ally, withdrew its support for the government.**

*However, Lofven returned to the helm only two weeks later as the opposition was unable to form a viable coalition to take over.*

(He has since announced that he will step down as Social Democrat Party leader in November.)

Although Sweden has a system of rent controls with tenants' associations in a key role, affordable homes in cities such as Stockholm are still hard to come by.

The underlying problem is caused – as elsewhere – by a lack of housing.

Critics argue that tenancies in which rents are protected are available only to those who have the 'right' contacts or via the black market.

## UNAFFORDABLE WINCHESTER!

An average home in Winchester will now cost £630,432, an 8% increase in the last year, making it the least affordable city in the UK, according to the Halifax bank.

Although house prices in UK cities have grown overall by 10.3%, the Office for National Statistics reports that average earnings rose by only 2.1% over the same period.



Average city house prices increased to £287,440, while comparable average earnings rose to £35,677.

Buying a city home will now set buyers back 8.1 times their earnings, up from 5.6 times a decade ago.

Halifax's figures suggest that buying a home in the Hampshire commuter city will cost 14 times average earnings, even higher than Greater London's 11 times earnings.

**Halifax comments that "house prices have generally continued to outstrip wage growth". Who'd have thought it?**

## LHG EXECUTIVE 2020-2022

*LHG's Executive was elected at the AGM 21st March 2020 for the two years to 2022.*

### Executive members

Andy Bates (co-opted)

Janet Berry

John Bevan

Rachel Blake

Nick Bragger (co-opted)

John Cotton

Ed Derrick

Gerard Heffey (co-opted)

Ross Houston

Heather Johnson

Paul Martin

Amanda Pinnock

Sheila Spencer

Christopher Worrall  
(co-opted)

## WHAT IS THE LABOUR HOUSING GROUP?

The Labour Housing Group is a lobbying group that is affiliated to the Labour Party and dedicated to the development of a socialist housing policy.

You can contact us at <http://labourhousing.org/contact> and join us at <https://labourhousing.org/membership/>

Individuals must be members of the Labour Party and agree to be bound by Labour Party rules and the LHG constitution.

# YOU CAN \$TILL HE£P

If you are too busy to give time and energy, you can still help us in our work by making a donation by bank transfer to:

"Labour Housing Group", Account number 50478080, Sort code 08-90-06,

Co-operative Bank, PO Box 1AN, Blandford Street, Newcastle, NE99 1AN.

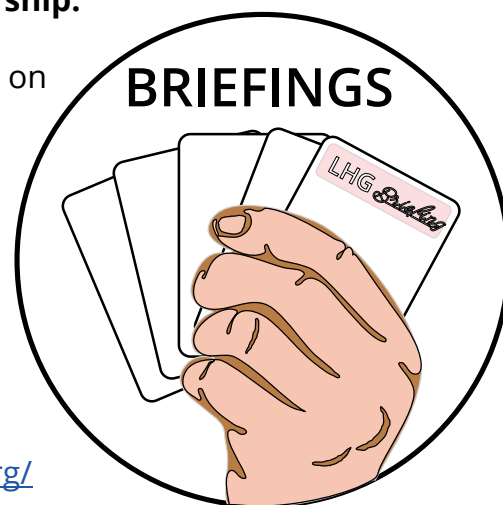
Of course, you can also send a cheque made payable to "Labour Housing Group" c/o **The Treasurer, Flat 2, 8 Torrington Park, London N12 9SS**

*Please quote "40th Anniversary"*

For readers new to housing policy issues, *Labour Housing Group* publishes a series of short guides aimed at a wide readership.

Our published **Briefings** on current topics include *Homelessness, Rough Sleeping, Affordable Housing, Private Renting Sector, Rural Housing* and *Leasehold Reform*.

They can be found at:  
<https://labourhousing.org/resources/lhg-briefings/>



**The latest edition covers *Council Homes*.**

If you would like to contribute, please email our Policy Officer, Paul Martin at [pauljmartin@clara.co.uk](mailto:pauljmartin@clara.co.uk).

*Opinions expressed here are not necessarily those of the Labour Housing Group.*